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ABSTRACT

Rhetoric handbooks and composition texts continue to teach that the main techniques of effective argumentation are based on logic--the use of evidence, deductive and inductive reasoning, definition of terms, and so on. Yet, as Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca argue in their book "The New Rhetoric," the most solid beliefs are those that are not only admitted without proof, but very often are not even made explicit. The validity of any argument has nothing to do with how logical it might be. The historical preoccupation with logical argumentation has not only distorted teaching, but has also been responsible for the misapplication of logic to the teaching of writing. Mainly as a consequence of the need to design systematic and logical curricula for teaching writing, teachers have been reduced to methods that make logical sense but that have little to do with how people actually write. Students are taught the necessity of having clear outlines prior to writing only because it seems logical that a good writer would have a clearly defined purpose and clearly delineated points to be covered prior to writing. The empirical reality of the situation, however, is that practically no professional writers use full outlines. In a same manner, the teaching of argumentation has been reduced to a few simplistic logical rules and formulae, with token mention of certain nonlogical emotional strategies--such as word connotation, tone, or figurative language--that have little to do with the real, persuasive force of most argumentative writing. (HOD)

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Chaim Perelman Re-examined: An Application to Classroom Methodology

by

Raymond H. Clines

(Paper presented at Conference on College Composition and Communication, March 22, 1985, Minneapolis, Minnesota)

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Rhetoric handbooks and composition texts continue to teach that the main techniques of effective argumentation are based on logic--use of evidence, deductive and inductive reasoning, definition of terms, and so on. A representative approach is taken by The Little, Brown Handbook (1983): "In argumentative essays. . .you state your opinion outright and then defend it logically with supporting ideas and evidence" (p. 7). And yet, one of the contributions of Chaim Perelman, who along with Kenneth Burke is probably one of the most significant rhetoricians of the twentieth century, is his explication of argumentation into a fundamentally nonlogical status--dissociative conceptualization, quasi-logical arguments, arguments by reciprocity and transitivity. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca state in their book The New Rhetoric, "We are firmly convinced that the most solid beliefs are those which are not only admitted without proof, but very often not even made explicit" (p. 8).

I think that our present-day teaching of argumentation is another example of what Beach and Bridwell in New Directions in Composition Research (senior editors Linda S. Flower and John T. Hayes, 1984) have noted as a major failing of composition theory of the past, namely our using static criteria for good writing derived from logic rather than empirical study. Even they point to the discrepencies between

"old" and "new" forms of argumentation: "The traditional model of classical rhetoric--of writer persuading audience--has been modified by the 'new' rhetoric which defines an entirely different range of writer-audience relationships, for example, techniques by which writers gain the 'identification' of their readers" (p. 4).

I would like to demonstrate the validity of Perelman's rejection of logic as a rhetorical force in argumentation by applying his ideas to some commonly held beliefs about persuasion and by analyzing an example of an argumentative essay presented in a current composition text. While the editors claim that the effectiveness of the essay lay in its appeal to logic, I would like to show how essays which rely soley on logic are quite superficial and ineffective in their appeal, and that at a deeper and more significant level, effective argumentative essays--even those reputed to have a strong logical basis--are using nonlogical techniques described by Perelman. The implications of Perelman's theories have yet to be absorbed into composition theory and classroom practice, and I would like to suggest the potential his theories could have for the teaching of argumentation in introductory and advanced writing classes. To begin, I would like to give a brief orientation to Perelman's theories as found in his major work The New Rhetoric.

As people who have grown up in the twentieth century, we lose sight of the fact that logic, up until the latter half of the nineteenth century, enjoyed no prestige either in scientific circles or with the

public at large, Richard Whately could write in Elements of Rhetoric, a major text of the late nineteenth century, that "if rhetoric no longer enjoys the esteem of the public, logic is some degrees lower in popular estimation." Logic has worked its way back into academic respectability primarily by analyzing methods of proof used by mathematicians. As we all know, modern formal logic is, for the most part, the study of the methods of demonstration used in the mathematical sciences.

A major break from the classical method of teaching rhetoric or "the art of knowing the available means of persuasion for any given subject," as Aristotle defines it, came with the concept of reason as developed by Descarte. Whereas Aristotle makes very clear that rhetoric is useful only where there is a genuine possibility of differing points of view, Descarte views disagreement as the grounds for error and ultimately irrationality. For Aristotle the very nature of deliberation and argumentation is opposed to necessary truths and self-evident propositions, since no one argues against what is self-evident or deliberates where the solution is a necessary and foregone conclusion. In Aristotle's view, rhetoric and argumentation are the domain of the credible, the plausible, or the probable; but not the domain of certainty or inevitability.

The pivotal point of Cartesian thinking, however, changed Western views on rationality by asserting that anything which cannot be incontrovertibly proven as true must, therefore, be taken as false. As

Descarte states in one of his discourses, "We should take well-nigh for false everything which is only plausible." It was Descarte, then, who made acceptance of self-evident truths the sign of a reasonable being and considered only those demonstrations which start from clear and provable ideas and extend the self-evidence of those ideas to other propositions. (In cognito ergo sum. . .) Thus ever since Descarte, we have tended to evaluate those arguments which most closely approach certainty in their verification as somehow being better or higher or more worthy of imitation. This way of viewing rhetoric-as a method of approaching certitude in argumentation-is a major break from the tradition of classical rhetoric which asserts the relativity of any argument whatsoever.

In fact, Aristotle devotes much of his Rhetoric to a demonstration of how evidence used to support one side of an argument can easily be inverted to give credence to the other side. An example which Aristotle uses is if a weakling is charged with the offense of violent assault, his defense is that his small stature is inconsistant with such a crime. If the person were a strong man, his defense would be that he would not likely do such a thing precisely because he is strong and he could be sure that people would think he was likely to do it. Clearly certainty had no place in Aristotle's conception of argumentation.

Another major blow to classical rhetoric is the advent of rational science since it, indeed, cannot be content with more or less probable opinions. Disagreement must inevitably be interpreted as a sign of error. Either the earth is at the center of the universe or it isn't--

either a particular vaccination builds immunity to a disease or it doesn't. All of our scientific technology is ultimately a derivation of Descarte's thinking which spelled the final demise of classical rhetoric: "Whenever two men come to opposite decisions about the same matter," says Descartes, "one of them at least must certainly be in the wrong, and apparently there is not even one of them who knows."

The real problem with seeing reason as being limited to conclusions of logical irrefutability is that it suggests that reason is incompetant to deal with those areas where neither experiment (induction) or logical deduction is in a position to furnish the solution to the problem. In all of these areas where there is no definite and logical right or wrong answer, Perelman asks, must we--since reason as defined by Descarte and developed by science is of no help--abandon ourselves to irrationality: the throw of the dice, the flip of a coin, intuition, suggestion, or, what is all too often the case, violence, where right or wrong is determined by the size of the army?

This, then, is a thumbnail sketch of some of the historical reasons why we have adopted such an emphatically logical approach to the teaching of persuasion and argumentation--and perhaps even writing in general.

The crucial thrust of Perelman's theory is that a revival of the classical interpretation of rhetoric is paramount to

understand and teach argumentation. And this means that the idea of self-evidence as a characteristic of reason must be assailed.

Neither certainty nor even truth exists in the domain of rhetoric. For that which partakes of certainty has no need of argumentation, and that which partakes of truth is dealing with a specific subject or topic and not with general principles of argumentation.

In Perelman's view the object of the theory of argumentation is the theory of the discursive techniques allowing us to induce or increase the mind's adherence to any particular thesis. It is a definition only slightly different from Aristotle's and incompasses Burke's sense of identification in any act of persuasion. Adherence of minds means that two people begin to think in similar ways which invariably increases a sense of identification in each other's world view. The important point of the theory is the recognition of the variable intensity of adherence of minds. As Perelman states, there is no reason to consider a priori the degrees of adherence to a thesis as proportional to its logical probability or to some outside criteria of truth or falsehood. In other words, an argument is judged effective only to the extent that it increases or decreases adherence to minds on a particular subject. The validity of any argument has nothing to do with how logical it might. Furthermore, we have wrongly assumed that people are persuaded or convinced on the basis of logic, while the truth of the matter is, as Susanne Langer states, "Rationality is something men persue merely to satisfy their curiosity or as an

afterthought when they have already decided an issue." (p.13) We come up with what we think are rational reasons for our behavior or beliefs in order to justify to others, perhaps even to ourselves, that we are rational beings. But usually these are nothing but rationalizations (note the root of the word) for the opinions formed long before and far from the arena of logic and rationality. Let me again emphasize the major point made by Perelman and Tyteca in their introduction to The New Rhetoric: "We are firmly convinced that the most solid beliefs are those which are not only admitted without proof but very often not even made explicit."

Obviously I do not have time to go into the methods of nonlogical argumentation which Perelman discusses in the nearly 600 pages of The New Rhetoric, but I would like to give just one example that pertains to the sense in which we all see rhetoric as a screen through which reality is observed and often distorted as in the case of propaganda and advertising and the sense in which we see it as a way of getting at truth and reality that is otherwise obscured. We are all too familiar with the negative connotations of the word rhetoric. It is implicit in such phrases as "political rhetoric," or "legal rhetoric." We often hear statements such as, "Let's get beyond the rhetoric and find out what the real issues are." In such instances language is being used as a way to subterfuge or camouflage the truth. We see such techniques at work a hundred times a day in the persuasive appeal of most advertising--advertising that attempts to persuade us of something that doesn't actually exist: we will become sexually irrestible

if we drive a certain kind of car or use a certain brand of tooth-paste.

On the other hand, we all know that rhetorical techniques can be used not as a screen that distorts reality, but as powerful tools to probe and examine what is true or real. I think one of the clearest statemants for the use of rhetoric in this sense is given by Joseph Conrad in the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus:

> My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel--it is, before all, to make you see. That--and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm--all you demand--and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask (p.iv).

It obviously behooves anyone interested in persuading or arguing a particular point to avoid any suggestion that he is using rhetoric in the former sense. And this is a very real problem because in our present world where we are bombarded by reams of false advertising every day we are constantly on our guard to distinguish what is reality from what is "mere rhetoric." In any sort of effective argumentation, we want the reader to believe that we are using language and rhetoric in a way that brings out reality, as Conrad suggests, not obscuring or distorting it for personal reasons. We want our readers to believe in the naturalness of our appeal, not the artificiality of it; we want our readers to believe we are dealing with the substance of the issue and not the form, with the reality and not the rhetoric,

with what is real and not with what is manipulative or persuasive device.

Everytime we write a piece of argument or persuasion, we must contend with the natural inclination of all but the most naive readers to see what we have to say as something other than what it is regardless of the sincerity of our intentions, and reams of statistics and tightly-knit deductive syllogisms do little to dispel this kind of innate scepticism. Giving our students instruction in the logical methods of argumentation in no way prepares them to deal with this vital and recurrent problem. To give a sense of Perelman's insight into this area, I would like to quote a few passages from his chapter on "Consubstantiality" that address this issue:

> How can one react against the branding of a discourse as a device, or, better still, how can one prevent it? One of the pieces of advice most insistently given by the classical masters of rhetoric was to praise the oratorical skill of one's opponent while concealing or minimizing one's own. In addition to having words of praise for one's opponent's elequence, it is a good thing never to refute his argument in such a way that he seems a poor advocate. . . .
>
> Everything that proclaims talent is to be scrupulously avoided. I consider the most perfect to be that which is least noticed, for, when things have the odor of study and art about them, people may conclude that those who utter them have little of either art or study or that they do not know how to use them. . . .
>
> Elements which can be interpreted as indications of spontaneity are particularly efficacious for ensuring correspondence with reality rather than device. . . .
>
> Indications of clumsiness or of sincerity are effective. The introduction of arguments

> that are not well suited to the audience can sometimes turn out to be effective, and it is not always the perfectly suited argument which turns out to be the best. Even degredation and misuse of language can be striven for as a literary device and a number of them have a settled place in stylistics as a means of giving a sense of reality rather than artifice. . . .
>
> Any painful declaration, particularly a confession, will be presumed to be sincere. So will any statement that threatens to alienate the audience. Since any technique which seems contrary to the end to be attained makes a big impression, one will not scruple to use such a technique as the ultimate device. . .

These are some rather radical and certainly nonlogical techniques which address the problem of seeing rhetoric as device or artifice.

What I would like to demonstrate now is how our preoccupation with logical argumentation has not only distorted our teaching, but in order to find examples of discourse that bear out our misguided logical heuristic, we have allowed ourselves to misinterpret examples of argumentative writing.

Nearly all of the anthologies that I have seen that have examples of argumentative essays, use essays which are highly logical, but I have serious reservations about how persuasive or convincing many are as argument. I could use any number of examples that I have come across, but for the sake of time, let me demonstrate what I mean with just one. The example I am using and which you have before you is taken from the leading anthology of expository modes--Decker's Patterns of Exposition now in its ninth edition.

An example which the editors use to provide a model for the argumentative essay is The Declaration of Independence. As they state in the explanatory note, "We can find no clearer example of the practical combination of deductive and inductive argument." A brief examination of The Declaration reveals that, indeed, the logic it contains is flawlessly perfect. The major premise of its deductive syllogism is that whenever people are subjected to abuses which take away their right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, they have the right to rebel and throw off the government. What then follows is a list of twenty-eight pieces of inductive evidence--England has imposed taxes; England has cut off trade, and so on--which the colonists offer as proof of such unacceptable despotic abuses. The conclusion of the inductive argument forms the minor premise of the deductive argument: England is, in fact, guilty of taking away life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The conclusion inevitably follows: "We . . . the representatives of the United States. . . are absolved of all allegiance to the British Crown."

The outstanding rhetorical feature of The Declaration of Independence is that if one accepts the premises, the logic is perfect and the conclusion is self-evident. As Perelman points out, however, no one argues over what is self-evident or inevitable. What, then, is The Declaration of Independence all about really? Well for one thing, it never was nor was it ever meant to be a piece of argumentative or persuasive writing. It is just what the title states it to be: a declaration. By the time The Declaration of Independence was written,

the Continental Congress had exhausted every means available to appeal their grievances to England. Finally, in an act of desperation the colonists decided to rebel. The Declaration of Independence represents the culmination of an extended period of dissatisfaction going back many years. At this point in our nation's history we had given up on diplomatic discussion or argumentation and were beyond caring whether anyone would be convinced or persuaded of our position.

If one wants to push the point that this is still a piece of argumentative writing worthy of being a model for beginning writers, one should remember that it was, after all, an abysmal failure; for it certainly did not convince the British that we were right. Despite the inevitability of the logic it contains, the War for Independence was fought. And it's important to remember that just as many British soldiers died thinking Americans were wrong as Americans did, believing they were right. And if what happened in the Faulkland Islands is any indication, the British are yet to be convinced by such an argument for all of its logical certitude.

Finally, I would like to point out something that I think lends credence to my previous quote by Susanne Langer. Much of what we do in terms of providing rational justification for our actions comes after the fact--is indeed a way of rationalizing to ourselves and others our ultimately non-rational behavior. And I would like to suggest that those famous words entailing an individual's right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" may be nothing but a rational-

ization, a logical afterthought to what was at the time the highly unusual and illogical behavior of the colonists. After all, the colonists were not nearly so concerned with the principles of democracy as they were with being overtaxed and exploited by England. If that seems far-fetched, one need only imagine what would have happened if England had been more tolerant and generous in its treatment. I think the colonists would have been quite content to have remained loyal British subjects regardless of the political system by which they were being ruled. What the colonists were saying is that they were tired of being treated as a British colony, but because they were, in fact, a colony and because Great Britain had been treating its colonies in the same way for several centuries, such sentiments appeared more than a little foolhardy. There had to be something more logical at stake than just that. Thus, our famous "all men are created equal" credo.

If I have succeeded in doing anything in this presentation, it is, I hope, to have shown how the methods by which we teach argumentation and persuasion are yet another example of the misapplication of logic to the teaching of writing. Mainly as a consequence of the need to design systematic and logical curricula for teaching writing, we have reduced our methods to techniques that make logical sense but which have little to do with how people actually write. As Beach and Bridwell point out, practically no one writes the way handbooks and rhetorics tell us we should. We drum into our students the necessity of having clear outlines prior to writing only because it seems <u>logical</u>

that a good writer would have a clearly defined purpose and clearly deliniated points to be covered before he begins writing. The empirical reality of the situation, however, is that practically no professional writers use full outlines. We teach our students term after term that each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence and that all succeeding sentences should elaborate on that topic. We do this because it seems logical and because a good paragraph could be written like this. It is something easy to teach: we can build our lesson plans on it and devise evaluation policies around it. All the while the truth of the matter is that in every study undertaken to measure such a structural feature, it has been repeatedly reported that working writers, professional writers, rarely use topic sentences and that the only consistent feature about paragraphs in professional writing is that they begin with an indentation. In the same way we have reduced our teaching of argumentation to a few simplistic logical rules and formulae with token mention of certain nonlogical emotional strategies such as word connotation, tone, or figurative language which have only a little to do with the real persuasive force of most argumentative writing. In our desire to be didactically or heuristically economical and succinct, we underplay the complexity of writing but sacrifice much that is real and true in the process.

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